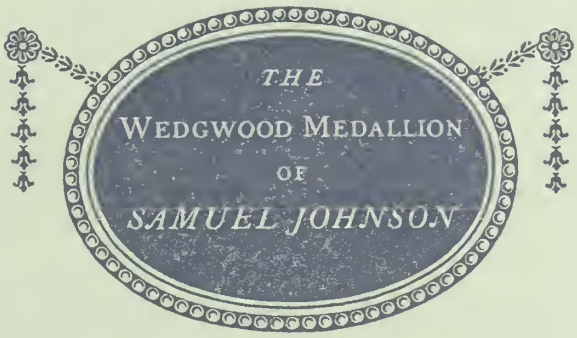
To Walter Dreyfus

To whom can and shall the finding
of this book is an eloquent testimonial -
With best wishes for the New Year -

Barnett Segal

1 Jan 1927


THE
WEDGWOOD MEDALLION
OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON

LONDON : HUMPHREY MILFORD

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

THE WEDGWOOD MEDALLION

OF

SAMUEL JOHNSON

A STUDY IN ICONOGRAPHY

BY

CHAUNCEY BREWSTER TINKER

CAMBRIDGE

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

MCMXXVI

COPYRIGHT 1926 BY CHAUNCEY BREWSTER TINKER

385 COPIES PRINTED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF

BRUCE ROGERS AT THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

U. S. A.

A LIST OF THE PLATES

1. The Flaxman Medallion (*frontispiece*)

2. Reynolds's Portrait of Johnson (1770)

3. Nollekens's Bust of Johnson (1777)

4. Harding's Drawing of Johnson (1782)

5. Reynolds's Portrait of Johnson (*ca.* 1783)

6. The Rejected Wedgwood Medallion

7. Bartolozzi's Engraving of the Medallion (1784)

8. Trotter's Etching of the Medallion (1784)

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2014

https://archive.org/details/wedgwoodmedallio00tink

1

THE FLAXMAN MEDALLION

THE
WEDGWOOD MEDALLION
OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON

THIS likeness of Samuel Johnson was made at some time during the last year and a half of his life, for inclusion in Josiah Wedgwood's famous and popular series of 'Illustrious Moderns.' It is an oval cameo in black and white (or pale blue and white) jasperware, measuring four inches by three inches, the original mould of which is preserved in the Wedgwood Museum at Etruria, Stafford. From the time of its first manufacture in 1784, it has been familiar to all collectors of Wedgwoodware, as one of the finest of the portraits of eminent men cast in this and similar forms; but it has been strangely overlooked by such critics and literary historians as make use of illustrative documents, and, in particular, by that odd race of enthusiasts who call themselves *Johnsonians* and [1]

display an interest in every portrait or caricature, genuine or fanciful, which purports to represent their Sage. How it has happened thus to elude them is a matter of slight significance compared with the problem respecting its origin and its value as a likeness.

The date of its issue is, happily, ascertained by the records of the firm, in which, together with a similar medallion of Captain Cook, it is assigned to the year 1784.[1] This, however, merely informs us of the year in which the cameo was offered for sale; it is probable that the wax model on which it was based was made some months before, since a considerable lapse of time was necessary between the receipt of the wax model at the factory and the final preparation of the mould for the furnace. I incline to the belief that the model must be assigned to some date anterior to June 16th, 1783, when Johnson suffered a paralytic stroke, thus antedating the period of final decay which resulted in his last illness.

The medallion belongs, then, to that period in the history of Josiah Wedgwood's pottery when John Flaxman, in his twenty-eighth year, but not yet at the zenith of his fame, was engaged in moulding wax figures for reproduction in the jasperware cameos for which Etruria was already famous. The wax models are not, as a rule, preserved, although a few

1. E. Meteyard, *Handbook of Wedgwoodware*, p. 190; Meteyard, *Life of Josiah Wedgwood* (1866), vol. ii, p. 448.

specimens remain at Etruria, and others seem to have found their way into the hands of private collectors; but most models are so broken or injured during the manufacture of the mould as to lose much of their artistic value. Like the manuscripts of authors, they get lost or destroyed.

That the original model for the medallion was the work of John Flaxman seems in a high degree probable, but cannot be actually proved. Mr. Harry Barnard, the leading authority in England on old Wedgwoodware and the resident expert of the firm at Etruria, assigns fifteen of the medallions[1] to Flaxman as 'certainly' his, and attributes six more to him, though failing to find 'actual proof' of their origin. No attempt was made at Wedgwood's factory to keep a record of the 'authorship' of the various pieces. There are two quite distinct explanations of this indifference. In the first place, the practice of permitting a sculptor to claim a particular medallion was considered a breach of that commercial etiquette by which an artist is supposed to merge his reputation in that of the 'house' which he serves. Two medallions — those representing Shakespeare and Garrick — were actually issued with the signature of the artist, Hackwood; but Josiah Wedgwood was indignant when he discovered it, and wrote to his partner, Bentley, December 22nd, 1777, 'I shall prevent his exposing

1. Among these were the medallions of Sir Joseph and Lady Banks, Mr. and Mrs. Meerman, Mrs. Siddons, and the Duchess of Devonshire.

himself again, now I have found out.'[1] In the second place, it was frequently necessary to alter the models that were submitted, in order to prepare them for firing and to ensure attainment of the best results in a medium very different from wax. Hackwood himself was a master in this art of touching up and preparation, and would probably have been among the first to resent the attribution of a given likeness to any single artist save himself. In any case we may be certain that the medallion felt the touch of more than one hand during its creation, and that it was submitted to Wedgwood himself for final approval before being offered to the public for sale.

But an inquiry yet more interesting lies behind the question we have been considering. Did Flaxman, or such other artist as made the original likeness, model his wax 'from the life' or merely from some earlier portrait, easily accessible to the artist? Either method was commonly employed, according to the conditions confronting the modeller. That certain of the likenesses were 'from the life' is proved by Wedgwood's advertisement announcing that portraits would be taken by his artists from living persons. It is known, for instance, that Hackwood was three times sent to the home of Mrs. Crewe, to model the head of her son.[2] But it was obviously impossible to pursue this practice in making the portraits of Dryden,

---

1. Harry Barnard, *Chats on Wedgwood Ware* (1924) p. 190. 2. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Julius Cæsar. Moreover, it was inconvenient and perhaps needless to send an artist to the Continent to make a new portrait of Rousseau or Voltaire. Even in the case of living subjects, Wedgwood's artists were sometimes content to work with prints or engravings, though this method would certainly not be preferred were it possible to persuade the person concerned to grant a sitting. The latter must, indeed, have been the commoner practice. A glance at the list of medallions known to be from Flaxman's own hand will reveal a majority of which no print or engraving or other likeness of use to a modeller could possibly have been obtained, and which must therefore have been from life.

There is, indeed, no adequate reason for assuming that if Flaxman, as representing the great English potter, asked for a sitting, Johnson refused it. Despite the anfractuosities of the human mind among which he reckoned 'a superstitious reluctance to sit for a picture,' he seems to have relished the experience keenly. He had granted sittings to many artists of less distinguished connections and less proved abilities than Flaxman. On the eve of his stroke of paralysis he sat to Frances Reynolds. He may very well already have granted a similar favour to young Flaxman. Boswell, to be sure, makes no mention of such a sitting, but his silence, as I shall presently attempt to show, is of no significance at all.

If Flaxman did not model from the life, he must have had

recourse to some earlier portrait of Johnson which might have been used instead; but when we turn to the earlier portraits of Johnson and try to discover one that could have been Flax-
[2] man's source, we are at a stand. Reynolds's portrait in profile, painted for Miss Lucy Porter in 1770 and engraved by Watson in the same year, differs wholly in pose and treatment, and moreover represents a man conspicuously younger than the head on the medallion.

Another likeness that could have been used for a portrait in profile is the bust of Johnson carved by Nollekens in 1777. This appears to have been one of the best-known likenesses of Johnson during the last decades of the century. Boswell speaks as though he had seen the original bust, as well as many casts made from it.[1] A marble bust attributed to Nollekens is now in the possession of Mr. George Tite of London, who acquired it at the sale of Sir Robert Peel's collection. A similar one in lead, the property of Lieutenant-Colonel C. B. Croft-Lyons, is at present on exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is there described as 'a bust in lead after a clay bust by Nollekens in 1777.' It differs from Mr. Tite's bust in a few unimportant particulars. On the pedestal, as part of the supporting base for the figure, is a folio volume of the *Rambler*, whereas in the marble original the treatment of the pedestal, which is

1. *Life of Johnson*, Hill's ed., vol. iv, p. 421, n. 2.

about eight inches high, is quite conventional. In the lead bust, again, the lips are somewhat more noticeably parted than in the marble. This bust is familiar to Johnsonians from certain engravings of it which have commonly been used as illustrations. In 1815 it was drawn by Abraham Wivell, and engraved by W. T. Fry. In 1835 it was engraved by E. Finden, and used [3] as an illustration for Murray's *Johnsoniana*. A different view of the bust, based, evidently, on some replica, is used by Hill as a frontispiece for the second volume of his edition of the *Life* (1887). Other replicas, if such still exist, are unknown to me.[1]

Although this bust is praised by J. T. Smith in his *Nollekens and his Times*,[2] as being 'very fine' and 'wonderfully like,' and although it was praised by Chantrey and regarded by the sculptor himself as one of his best works, it did not please Johnson or his friends. Johnson had a cast of it sent to Miss Lucy Porter in November, 1777, but she did not like it. Early in the next year, Johnson wrote to her,

'*You judged rightly in thinking that the bust would not please. It is condemned by Mrs. Thrale, Mrs. Reynolds, and Mrs. Garrick; so that your disapprobation is not singular.*

'*These things have never cost me any thing, so that I do not much*

1. In the National Portrait Gallery is a bust by Bailey, evidently a copy of Nollekens.

2. Vol. i, pp. 51 ff.

know the price. My bust was made for the Exhibition, and shown for honour of the artist, who is a man of reputation above any of the other sculptors.'

The feature of the bust most open to criticism is the treatment of the hair, and as this is one of the details which helps us to a knowledge of the medallion, a word must be said about it. In the bust the hair is shown as flowing over the upper part of the ear and covering the forehead somewhat luxuriantly. It curls noticeably, falling over the right temple, and descending by the left ear and partly obscuring it. The sculptor has, as it were, represented Johnson's head *in naturalibus*, without a wig. The hair, however, was not Johnson's, but was modelled from the luxuriant poll of 'a sturdy Irish beggar, originally a street pavior, who, after he had sat an hour, refused to take a shilling, stating that he could have earned more by begging.'[1] In Flaxman's cameo the treatment of the hair is quite different. Its recession from the forehead has reached such a point that Johnson now appears quite bald. Moreover, the hair which, as in the bust, descends to the neck, is, if not absolutely straight, yet by no means curling.

No less instructive is the difference between the two in the treatment of the ear. In the bust the upper part of both ears is partially hidden by the flowing hair; but in the medallion, the

1. J. T. Smith, *op. cit.*

tip of the ear is revealed, and emphatically revealed, as one of the distinguishing traits of the likeness. It is noticeably pointed, so as to look, in certain lights, almost faunlike. In this feature, as in the treatment of the hair, it seems impossible that one merely copying from a bust should move from an idealistic rendering back toward nature, and from the hidden to the real. Is there more reason to expect a series of plastic likenesses to increase in authenticity in the course of copying than to expect the text of a manuscript to improve in the course of its reproduction by successive scribes? Flaxman's work can, it seems, hardly be conceived as deriving from that of Nollekens.

But one of the most important of all the engravings of John- [4]
son remains to be considered. It was the work of T. Trotter, was published February 10th, 1782, and was used to illustrate certain of the later editions of *The Beauties of Johnson*.[1] Trotter's name is familiar to every reader of Boswell's *Tour to the Hebrides* as the designer of the amusing frontispiece which represents Johnson in travelling costume armed with a large oak walking stick. This likeness, which is of course purely imaginary, is derived from the earlier one just mentioned.

---

1. The first edition appeared in the previous year, 1781, and had no frontispiece. By the next year the work had passed into a fourth edition, and a vignette of Johnson's head was printed on the title-page, or used as a frontispiece. See the Grolier Club *Catalogue of the Engravings of Johnson* (1909), No. 185.

That earlier likeness is described as 'Drawn from the life by J. Harding,' and as 'Etched by T. Trotter.' It represents Johnson as an elderly man in an elaborate wig, with waistcoat and coat, above which no frill is visible. The head, which is turned sharply toward the observer's right, is bent slightly forward, and the eyes are downcast. The face betrays signs of physical suffering, as does Reynolds's portrait of Johnson painted in 1770. I am not convinced that the statement on the engraving that it is derived from a drawing 'from the life' is to be understood literally. The countenance might, quite possibly, have been taken from James Watson's large mezzotint of Reynolds's 1770 portrait. Kearsley, who published it, does not appear to have been entirely veracious, for later he definitely asserted that Johnson had sat for his picture to 'Mr. Trotter' — in apparent forgetfulness of his attribution of the drawing to 'J. Harding' some years before.

It is of course possible that the medallion derives in some way from this popular engraving. If the Wedgwood artist worked with it as his only source, he had the delicate task of removing the wig, and the coat, and supplying the hair, ear, and neck from imagination or from some other picture. And no source for such necessary information appears to have been available to him.

One of the most characteristic traits of the countenance as shown in Flaxman's medallion is the mouth. The lips are

parted, and the lower one protrudes noticeably — a detail which appears in none of the earlier portraits of Johnson, but is found in the latest of them, the picture painted by Reynolds for Dr. Taylor, now in the possession of Mr. A. Edward Newton, who kindly permits me to reproduce it here. This [5] picture is significant in the present study because it must have been painted about the same period that Flaxman made his model for the medallion. In the painting the protrusion of the lower lip is plainly seen — it is more obvious in the original painting than in the half-tone illustration — and is caused, one supposes, by the loss of teeth from the upper jaw. The general similarity between the medallion and this portrait of Johnson is inescapable. Yet it cannot have been used by Flaxman, since no engraving of it was made; but it is significant as corroborating the general truthfulness of Flaxman's portrait.

It is not important here to enter upon a eulogy of the medallion. Suffice it to say that it is one of the most highly valued of all the medallions put forth by Josiah Wedgwood, an estimate that is readily understood when we contemplate its subtle union of dignity and verisimilitude. It seems impossible that such a work of art could have been created out of the chaotic materials for a likeness which were available to the modeller; and the supposition that Johnson gave a sitting to Flaxman grows more and more attractive. Yet I wish to say in no uncertain terms that this is, so far as the present

evidence is concerned, an unsupported hypothesis, beyond proof, and that it is even possible that Flaxman had never been in the presence of Johnson at all, but that his genius operated in so marvellous a way as to transmute the dull details of his predecessors into the delicacy and lifelikeness of the medallion. It is no easy task to discover the relationship between the various pictures of a man, all of which inevitably resemble one another, and all of which are, when once they have been made public, available for the forger or the idealist to debase or to exalt as he sees fit. If Flaxman and his assistants at Etruria succeeded in producing an admirable portrait of Johnson without recourse to a special sketch made in the presence of the sitter, let them have the same honour that we should unhesitatingly give them if the more conventional procedure could be acceptably proved to have taken place.

[6] And here it is convenient to mention a second medallion, struck, apparently, at the same time as the one we have been discussing, and sold, for a time, though afterwards withdrawn from the market. Like Flaxman's medallion, this has never been reproduced or studied in modern times, and is here first used as an illustration. Mr. Barnard, whose generosity is well known to those who have approached him for assistance, has had one specially struck for me from the old mould, though it is no longer regularly manufactured or sold by the Wedgwood firm. It is by a different hand, bearing no trace of

Flaxman's peculiar manner, and is probably from a different source, though the modeller may have been using the same drawing or wax sketch employed by Flaxman. It is, however, interesting as the original of certain likenesses of Johnson made after his death and, in particular, as the original of the halfpenny which was struck in his honour and which circulated in Staffordshire as currency.

That this medallion should have disappeared, leaving no record of its existence, is explained by the fact that it was not deemed a satisfactory specimen of Wedgwood's art, and was withdrawn from sale; but that Flaxman's medallion, which is so much more beautiful and was laid under contribution by many later engravers, should have passed unnoticed by biographers and critics of Johnson is difficult to understand. The medallion was used by artists who neither acknowledged their indebtedness nor reproduced the beauty of their source. The most important engraver to make use of it was the great Bartolozzi, who reproduced it as a frontispiece to a posthu- [7] mous edition of the *Dictionary*. It was published October 8th, 1785, by John Fielding.[1] In all respects of pose and detail the engraving corresponds to Flaxman's medallion. The head is of exactly the same size, and must have been made by Bartolozzi with Flaxman's work before him and with measuring

1. Grolier Club *Catalogue*, No. 188.

rule in hand. He has added wig, coat, and frill, and has made a portion of the right eyebrow visible. But he has preserved the general effect of a medallion in rather high relief, enclosing the now enlarged figure in a circular instead of an oval frame.

[8] A less artistic use of the medallion was made by the versatile Mr. Trotter, who engraved it for a frontispiece to the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, which was printed by Kearsley soon after Johnson's death. The engraving was hastily made, so that it might be published while the interest in Johnson was still at its height. It was actually issued December 16th, 1784, three days after Johnson's demise. It is noticeable that the engraving is printed from an oval plate, and that the figure is represented as a carving. It follows the medallion slavishly, even to the shape of the lines where the bust is supposed to terminate, but Trotter contrives to destroy all lifelikeness as completely as the Angel of Death had done to the original some hours before.

Yet Kearsley had the impudence to assert (p. 88) that 'the Doctor sat for this picture to Mr. Trotter, in February, 1782, at the request of Mr. Kearsley' — a statement that may be true of Harding's drawing above, but can hardly be true of this one. The only connection between the two engravings seems to be that both were done by Trotter.

How, it will be asked, could such a work of art as Flaxman's

have eluded the unwearied vigilance of Boswell? In the first place, there is no reason for assuming that Boswell was in London during the period when Flaxman made his wax model, or for supposing that, if such a model were made, Johnson would feel it necessary to inform Boswell that he had given a sitting to a new artist. It was not his way to put Boswell in touch with the events that had occurred during their intervals of separation. Moreover, it must be candidly admitted that the biographer was strangely incomplete and certainly a little indifferent when he came, at the end of the great *Life,* to treat of the portraits of his hero. He was not much interested in any of the portraits except Reynolds's, and did not take the trouble to make a full list even of his. The first and largest of these portraits, representing Johnson in 1756, was 'in the possession of James Boswell, Esq.,' and this he proposed to use as a frontispiece. The other portraits were not brought into prominence by a too enthusiastic description of them. In a footnote,[1] he professes to enumerate the engravings of Johnson, but the list, as a careful student of it may see, is hastily made and hard to use.

As an example of the biographer's indifference to the representation of his hero by the portrait-painter, I may cite his neglect, possibly his ignorance, of two of Reynolds's most interesting portraits of Johnson. Both are fanciful, but they are

1. *Life*, vol. iv, p. 421, n. 2.

none the less interesting for that. One shows Johnson as a young man, holding a copy of *Irene*, which was engraved by George Zobel[1] and was long in the possession of the Bishop of Ely. Another, a delightful *jeu d'esprit*, is an imaginary picture of Johnson as a baby—a very Infant Samuel—with head sunk in profound meditation. It is quite possible that Reynolds, who was not given to talking about his pictures, may never have mentioned these products of his lighter fancy; it is even conceivable that, since he painted incessantly, he may have forgotten all about them. In any case, Boswell's failure to mention them is understandable, though unfortunate. But how shall we account for his indifference to the last and most touching of Reynolds's portraits of Johnson?

To the student of the iconography of Samuel Johnson, then, Boswell is no satisfactory guide, nor, indeed, a very helpful assistant. Nor has anyone since Boswell's time consented to burden himself with the long and technical study which is necessary in order to collect and relate the various likenesses of Johnson. Hence it has come about that a medallion of Johnson which has been familiar to collectors of Wedgwoodware from the beginning[2] has eluded the attention of students.

---

1. Grolier Club *Catalogue*, No. 195a.

2. It was first called to my attention by my friend, Mrs. Samuel Hemingway, of New Haven, a collector of Wedgwoodware. To Mrs. Hemingway I take this opportunity of returning my grateful thanks.

The interests of amateurs of English pottery and historians of English literature do not, unfortunately, always run parallel; but it may perhaps be inferred from this brief study that those interests are not always unrelated, and that there may perhaps be other points of contact between them which remain to be detected.

REPRODUCTIONS

2

REYNOLDS'S PORTRAIT OF JOHNSON

1770

R. Sayer Excudit.

Sir Joshua Reynolds pinx.

James Watson fecit.

Samuel Johnson

London. Printed for Rob.t Sayer Map & Printseller No.53 Fleet Street. Published as the Act directs 10 July 1770

3

NOLLEKENS'S BUST OF JOHNSON

1777

From a bust by J. Rolleckens R.A.

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY ALBEMARLE STREET
1835

4

HARDING'S DRAWING OF JOHNSON

1782

Publishd as the Act directs by G. Kearsly N.o 46 Fleet Street Feb.y 10.th 1792

5

REYNOLDS'S PORTRAIT OF JOHNSON

ca. 1783

From the original in possession of A. Edward Newton, Esq.

6

THE REJECTED WEDGWOOD MEDALLION

7

BARTOLOZZI'S ENGRAVING OF THE MEDALLION

1784

SAMUEL JOHNSON L.L.D.

Born Sept.r 1709; died Dec.r 13.th 1784.

Published October 8.th 1785, by John Fielding, Pater-Noster Row, London

8

TROTTER'S ENGRAVING OF THE MEDALLION

1784

SAMUEL JOHNSON, L.L.D.

Died Dec.r 13th 1784.

Published according to the Act directed by C. Kennedy, N.o 16 Fleet Street Dec.r 16th 1784

· EX LIBRIS ·
· CHARLES · AUGUSTE ·

· RHEAULT ·